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OSTA seeks community input on school bell time changes

BY ROSALYN STEVENS
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A small group of parents and school officials attended a meeting held by the Ottawa Student Transportation Authority (OSTA) last week, to discuss proposed changes to school start and end times at McGregor Easson Public School, Carleton Heights Public School, and St. Augustine Elementary School.

The changes have been put forward in an effort to collaborate bus routing for schools under both the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) and the Ottawa Catholic School Board (OCSB). The proposals would remove about 34 buses from the entire city system.

Under the initial proposal, St. Augustine students would experience a 10-minute delay in their school start time, with the morning bell moving from 9:05 a.m. to 9:15 a.m. and the afternoon bell changing to 3:45 p.m. from 3:35 p.m. At Carleton Heights and McGregor Easson schools the students would see morning bells moving ahead five minutes, from 9 a.m. to 8:55 a.m., and from 9:05 a.m. to 9 a.m. respectively. The afternoon bell at both schools would also change by five minutes, moving to 3:25 p.m. from 3:30 p.m. at Carleton Heights and to 3:30 p.m. from 3:35 p.m. at McGregor Easson.

Roy Wierenga, general manager of OSTA, said the proposed changes would result in students riding on the same bus to nearby schools or, in some cases, tiered routing, where a single bus would make two pick-up and drop-off routes each day. He said that the

proposals have been vetted to the OSTA board of directors, which includes officials from both school boards and will eventually be decided upon by the trustees of both boards.

"This night is all about receiving your input," he said to the gathered group.

Mr. Wierenga said some changes could be made to the final report before recommendations are implemented, adding that in all likelihood, the time change at St. Augustine school could be reduced to just five minutes.

"We fully recognize what you've talked about," he told the small group, "that five minutes is a major change."

If these changes are implemented, Mr. Wierenga explained, the current group of four buses servicing these schools would be reduced to three, creating a savings of about \$34,000.

"That's significant savings that ultimately goes back to the school," he noted.

He explained that the changes and efficiencies were mandated by the provincial government, as was the formation of a collaborative transportation authority, which incorporates all schools in the area. Given the requirement for change, Mr. Wierenga said, the reality of school bus routing is changing across the province.

"The days of a single school bus doing a single school [route] really are gone," he said, "and the Ministry's mandated that we find these efficiencies."

The proposals put forward would work logistically, he said, however the OSTA board has tasked the group to gain a better understanding of the impact such changes would have on



The Ottawa West Golden Knights Junior B hockey team taped their sticks pink in honour of teammate Matthew MacDonald's mother Lori, who lost the battle to breast cancer late last year. The home opener of the second round playoff series on March 5 was dedicated to breast cancer awareness. See page 5 for the full story.

families in Ottawa. Mr. Wierenga said he understood that much of a day's planning takes place "around the breakfast table," as students rush to meet the school bus and parents make their way to work. The consultation process is designed to include parents and the school community, school principals, school councils, bus companies, and repre-

sentatives from the City of Ottawa.

Before last week's meeting, OSTA had met with a number of parent groups at different schools to discuss the changes. During those meetings a number of concerns were echoed.

Among those were concerns related to the discipline of children on the same bus who attend differ-

ent schools, he said. In these cases, Mr. Wierenga said there will be an emphasis on collaboration between principals from different schools, as well as strong communication with the school bus drivers, who he said are imperative to making this plan work.

"It's really critical that we're all stakeholders to keep [students] safe," Mr.

Wierenga said.

Sheila O'Farrell, principal of St. Augustine school, said she has heard concern from families who have children in her school and others in nearby Frank Ryan Senior Elementary School. Traditionally, children from St. Augustine transition to

— Please see **BELL CHANGE** on page 6



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